

## HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

### SIX-OARED PLEASURE BARGE *JOHN WIELAND*

HAER No. CA-2360

**Location:** Dolphin Club, 502 Jefferson Street, San Francisco, San Francisco County, California

Six-Oared Pleasure Barge *John Wieland* is located at latitude: 37.807671, longitude: -122.421293, which represents the Dolphin Club building. The coordinates were obtained from Google Earth in 2019. There is no restriction on the release of the coordinates to the public.

**Date of Construction:** 1887

**Rig/Type of Craft:** Six-Oared Pleasure Barge

**Trade:** Recreation

**Principal Dimensions:** Length: 40', Beam: 4'-8"

**Designer/Builder:** Alfred F. Rogers

**Original Owner:** The Dolphin Swimming & Boating Club

**Present Owner:** The Dolphin Swimming & Boating Club

**Disposition:** Active: Recreation and regattas

**Significance:** Six-Oared Pleasure Barge *John Wieland* is a rare example of an elegant nineteenth-century wooden pleasure craft, hand built by Alfred F. Rogers, and still expertly maintained and rowed on San Francisco Bay. The boat serves as a “flagship” for the Dolphin Swimming and Boating Club.

**Description:**

*John Wieland* is a six-station plus coxswain, sweep-oared, sliding seat, lapstrake wooden barge built in 1887 by Alfred F. Rogers for the Dolphin Swimming and Boating Club. From a distance *John Wieland* might resemble Cornish pilot gigs that originated as plain work boats. Upon closer comparison, *John Wieland* is longer, more streamlined, and highly crafted with sliding seats and other refinements. It is one of the most beautiful small boats ever seen on San Francisco Bay.

*John Wieland* is 40' long between perpendiculars, 4'-8" beam width, and currently weighs about 588 pounds. It was built as a unique vessel to combine a swift, sea-kindly hull form with traditional fixed rowing thwarts, overlaid with seat rails fit for sliding seats with bronze wheels. Although designed for pleasure and leisurely outings, the boat is frequently raced and is capable of speeds of six or more knots with a strong crew. As for capacity, the boat has handled a dozen or more persons aboard on many excursions.

Between 1991 and 1997 Dolphin Club volunteers, directed by Jon Bielinski, completely reconstructed this historic craft using the club's boat repair shop and tools. Drawings and details from 1887 did not exist. Hogging and rough repairs over the decades had distorted the hull. Therefore, the first task of Jon Bielinski, the club's master boatbuilder, was to loft the boat to understand the original lines.

During the entire project, the objective was to stay true to the original design. That said, the following technical description is mostly of the boat as it currently exists.

Bielinski selected and procured the finest wood, considering the life of the boat. He harvested some wood, like black locust and apple, in the forests of Northern California. Pieces were then cut and shaped by hand for each part of the boat.

White Oak is used for the keel, hog, rub rail, stretchers, and some other parts. The keel, due to many past repairs, needed a fresh design. Jon Bielinski chose a T-shaped design using oak (1" thick x 1- $\frac{1}{4}$ " wide) topped with a  $\frac{1}{2}$ " oak hog piece. This modification has enhanced both longitudinal stiffness and flex plus reduced the boat's weight by several hundred pounds.

Black locust, selected for its strength and resistance to rot, is used for the stem, breast hook, quarter knees, yoke, and parts of the rudder. More importantly, the eighty-two frames/ribs (46 full, 36 half) are black locust. These ribs ( $\frac{1}{2}$ " thick x  $\frac{5}{8}$ " wide) were steamed and then individually bent to the exact shapes required.

There are seven strakes/planks starboard and port side, each  $\frac{5}{16}$ " thick. Spanish cedar is used for the sheer strakes. All other planks are Port Orford cedar. For protection in rough seas, the bow and stern are raised further with bulwarks and rub rails. Gunwales are a solid combination of fir, Spanish cedar, and oak.

Inwale, bilge stringer, riser, diagonal bracing, thwart and deck are made of Douglas fir. Apple wood is used for the thwart knees, stern knees, and forward seating. The transom, name board, and parts of the rudder are mahogany. Six coats of Le Tonkinois varnish protect the wood and make the boat shine.

There are six racing-style pulling stations. Mighty 12'-11"-long sweep oars power the boat. In the past the club purchased oars from local boat builders or George Pocock in Washington. Now these hollowed Sitka spruce oars, with D-shaped looms, are made in the Dolphin Club shop. Fortunately, during the rebuild some incredibly old, bronze oarlocks were obtained from Pocock. The scantlings of the sliding seats minimize the weight of the metal with

sufficient buoyancy from the wood to allow the seats to float. Seat elevation is ideally set for both flat water racing and to allow feathering high in choppy conditions. The coxswain maintains the course using a yoke and steering lines.

Included in the rebuild project was a new, large dolly to cradle the boat properly and to smoothly roll it to and from the club's boathouse.

Summary of Materials: Port Orford cedar planking plus various woods including Spanish Cedar, Black Locust, White Oak, Apple, Mahogany, and Douglas Fir. Silicon Bronze bolts and screws, Copper rivets, and Brass fittings. Le Tonkinois varnish.

### **History:**

The Dolphin Swimming & Boating Club of San Francisco was founded in 1877 for the benefit of twenty-five charter members. The term "Boating" used in the club name does not refer to sailing but to rowing, both for racing and recreation. Racing was a major sport and spectator attraction in that era. Craft like those operated by Dolphin Club members were also working boats on San Francisco Bay. Of course, the boats were all handmade from wood.

The Dolphin Club is proud of its fleet of twenty wooden rowboats, some over a hundred years old but still used daily. They are mostly sliding seat lapstrake singles or doubles and durable enough for the rough conditions of the Bay. These lapstrake vessels are designed to be renewable. Today the Dolphin Club is a diverse mix of about 1600 members, and as volunteers, directed by two master boatbuilders, they keep alive the skills required to maintain the boats to new construction standards.

John Wieland was a co-founder and considered to be the major force in establishing the Dolphin Swimming & Boating Club of San Francisco in 1877. Two of his sons were among the twenty-five Charter Members of the club.

John Wieland was born on October 6, 1829, in Baden-Württemberg, Germany. He immigrated to America in 1849, found his way to California, and had success in the gold fields. He then settled in San Francisco and became a partner in a bakery. Wieland married in 1853, becoming the father of eleven children.

In 1855 John Wieland entered the brewing business and by 1867 was sole proprietor of the Philadelphia Brewery. It would become the largest brewery west of the Mississippi. Wieland was one of the most prosperous and influential citizens of San Francisco when he died tragically in a house fire in 1885 at the age of fifty-five. His family then commissioned the building of an impressive boat and presented it to the Dolphin Club as a gift and an enduring tribute to John Wieland.

The 44', six-oared pleasure barge *John Wieland* was crafted by Alfred F. Rogers in 1887. Born in Ohio in 1856, Al Rogers had ventured west to San Francisco by 1875. He worked as a boat builder, learning the skills in several shops, plus he also rowed competitively for the Pioneer

Club and later for the Ariel Rowing Club. Ultimately, he separated himself from other builders by specializing in the finest and fastest racing craft on the Pacific Coast and Hawaii.

Al Rogers built *John Wieland* in his shop in San Francisco on the west side of Kentucky Street just south of Fourth Street. Within ten years city development forced Rogers to relocate his shop across the bay to Alameda Point. Rogers continued to build all types of wooden racing boats for clubs up and down the Pacific Coast. In 1915 he delivered *South End*, a 40' barge along the lines of *John Wieland*. Ever since, for more than a century, these two “pleasure” boats have battled in regattas with both men and women crews. Alfred Rogers died on January 1, 1929, in Alameda, California.

As expected, for any wooden craft to last over 130 years, *John Wieland* has required constant maintenance and some major repairs. In September 1952 the barge, already structurally fragile, was swamped in high waves and nearly lost off Alcatraz Island. The boat was out of service for eight years, despite numerous fund raisers, repairs, and unsuccessful attempts to relaunch her. That was also a period of waning interest in rowing wooden boats in rough water, and there was more than one suggestion to just burn the old thing. However, by August 1960 *John Wieland* was once again delighting crews with excursions to ball games at Candlestick Park, to picnics on Angel Island, and to the watering holes of Tiburon and Sausalito.

In 1962 the Dolphin Club celebrated the seventy-fifth anniversary of the *John Wieland* barge by rowing it to Tiburon with major press and TV coverage. The honored crew consisted of old-time oarsmen guided by coxswain Dr. A. W. Ward, who was proudly wearing his 1905 rowing medal.

By 1968 the barge once again required a restoration, which held together until 1979 when it was taken out of service until February 1981. Over the years, well-meaning club members did much of the work but lacked the knowledge and necessary skills.

Then in 1984 boatbuilder Jon Bielinski joined the Dolphin Club and began to rejuvenate the club's neglected fleet of wooden boats. He also organized and taught many volunteers the skills necessary to maintain the valuable boats. By the end of 1991 Jon Bielinski had detected far too many structural problems with *John Wieland*. He decommissioned the barge for a complete restoration to be refitted from the keel up. The club's Board of Governors approved \$43,000 to fund the project. It would then take six years of painstaking and detailed effort by Jon Bielinski and over 170 club volunteers to rebuild the barge to new condition. As one inspired worker remarked “We'll go boldly into the twenty-first century with a relic from the nineteenth century.”

On July 27, 1997, at a large celebration, the sleek and glistening *John Wieland* once again slipped into the waters of San Francisco Bay, and now, two decades into the twenty-first century, that old relic is still pulling strong.

**Sources:** Dolphin Club Board Minutes, boat shop records, publications, and membership records. These club materials are preserved in the Dolphin Club Archives, 502 Jefferson St, San Francisco, Ca 94109.

Barde, Robert E. with Patrick F Cunneen. *South End: Sport and Community at the Dock of the Bay*. Gibbons Press, 2019.

Bielinski, Jon. "San Francisco's Oldest Rowing Clubs." *WoodenBoat* 40 (1981): 46-49.

Kortum, John. "A Flagship Relaunched: The JOHN WIELAND Rows Again." *WoodenBoat* 155 (July/August 2000): 37-39.

Pickelhaupt, Bill. *The Rowing Clubs of California, 1851-1933*. New Braunfels, Texas: Flyblister Press, 2016.

Additional research used historic copies of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Call* and *Examiner* newspapers and genealogical data bases accessed on Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.org.

## **Project**

**Information:** The Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) is a long-range program that documents and interprets historically significant engineering sites and structures throughout the United States. HAER is part of Heritage Documentation Programs, a division of the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Todd Croteau, HAER Architect, manages the HAER Maritime Program. Jon Bielinski prepared the original drawing in 1999. Todd Croteau traced and reformatted it in 2020. Richard B. Cooper contributed historical data, and Susanne Friedrich shot the photographs. All are members of the Dolphin Swimming & Boating Club, January 2021.

**Appendix: Illustrations**

**Figure 1:** *John Wieland*, Photograph by Susanne Friedrich, October 19, 2013



**Figure 2:** *John Wieland*, Photograph by Susanne Friedrich, October 19, 2013



**Figure 3:** *John Wieland* at Speed, Photographer Unknown, ca. 2002

